

UNITED STATES PATENT APPLICATION
FOR

ARCADE GAME

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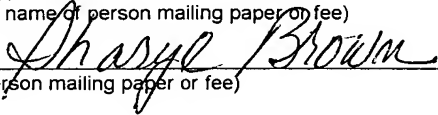
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ARCADE GAME

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims priority to and the benefit of Patent Application No. 10/176,100, filed on June 19, 2002, entitled "ARCADE GAME WITH SPINNING WHEEL BONUS," by Kelly et al, which is a continuation of Application No. 09/695,712, filed on October 23, 2000, now issued as Patent No. 6,446,964, which is a continuation of Application No. 09/351,408, filed on July 9, 1999, now Patent No. 6,244,595, which is a continuation of Application No. 08/995,649, filed on December 22, 1997, now Patent No. 5,967,514, which is a continuation of Application No. 08/428,524, filed on April 21, 1995, now Patent No. 5,700,007, which is a continuation of Application No. 08/176,862, filed on January 3, 1994, now Patent No. 5,409,225, which is a continuation of Application No. 07/956,057, filed on October 2, 1992, now Patent No. 5,292,127 all applications being incorporated herein by reference.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] This invention relates to games normally played in an arcade environment, and more particularly to such games played by directing a playing piece towards a target and seeing the results of game play displayed on a rotatable wheel.

BACKGROUND OF THE RELATED ART

[0003] Roll-down games have been played for many years in arcade environments. These games usually include a ramp and one or more targets at the end of the ramp. A player rolls a ball down the ramp towards a desired target, and a game score is displayed on a scoring display based upon the player's success.

[0004] In U.S. Patent 810,299, O. E. Pettee describes a game in which a ball is rolled down a plane towards an upright target pin. When the pin is impacted, a motor activates to spin a dial. When the dial stops spinning, it indicates the player's score.

[0005] In U.S. Patent 2,141,580, S. E. White describes a game in which a ball is tossed into holes marked in various time intervals. A spinning dial hand is stopped from rotating by the amount of time indicated by the hole that the ball is tossed into. The object of the game is to make the dial stop at a chosen character or numeral on the dial face.

[0006] In U.S. Patent 2,926,915, F. D. Johns describes a skee-ball game in which a ball is rolled towards a scoring drum and in which tickets are dispensed to the player by an electrically operated automatic ticket dispenser.

[0007] Roll-down games of the prior art, while enjoyable, are rather simple games and, as such, often lead to rapid player boredom. This is undesirable in an arcade environment where revenues are directly related to the continuous, repeated use of the games.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

- [0008] FIGURE 1 is a perspective view of two individual game units connected to a progressive score display;
- [0009] FIGURE 2 is a flow chart of the progressive enhanced award process;
- [0010] FIGURE 3 is a block diagram of the microprocessor and display electronics used in the progressive bonus apparatus;
- [0011] FIGURE 4 is a front view of an individual game unit;
- [0012] FIGURE 5 is a side cross-section of the playing surface and playing piece return mechanism of an individual game unit;
- [0013] FIGURE 6 is a detail view of the wheel, display, and target apertures of an individual game unit;
- [0014] FIGURE 6a is a detail view of the wheel scoring indicator;
- [0015] FIGURE 7 is a block diagram of the control system for an individual game unit;
- [0016] FIGURE 8 is a block diagram of the electronic components used in an individual game unit;
- [0017] FIGURE 9 is a perspective view of the wheel driving mechanism of an individual game unit including a preferred wheel position detector;
- [0018] FIGURE 10 is an alternate embodiment of a wheel position detector;
- [0019] FIGURE 11 is a detail view of the alternate wheel position detector of Fig. 10;
- [0020] FIGURE 12 is a cross sectional view of a reading mechanism for the alternate wheel position detector of Figures 10 and 11;
- [0021] FIGURE 13 is a cross-sectional view of the playing surface and playing piece return mechanism of an alternate embodiment of the present invention;
- [0022] FIGURE 14 is a detail view of the ball return mechanism of FIGURE 13;
- [0023] FIGURE 15 is a partial top view of the playing surface of the alternate embodiment of Fig. 13;
- [0024] FIGURE 16 is a front elevation view of an alternate embodiment of a game unit; and
- [0025] FIGURE 17 is a block diagram of the electronic components used in the game unit of Fig. 16.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0026] In Fig. 1, a multi-station game apparatus 10 in accordance with the present invention includes a progressive bonus apparatus 12 with progressive score display 14 coupled to a first individual game unit 16a and a second individual game unit 16b. Further individual game units 16 may be coupled to the progressive game apparatus 10 as desired.

[0027] Each individual game unit 16 has the ability to be played on its own, independent of the other game units 16 coupled to progressive bonus apparatus 12. Each individual game unit 16 includes a front panel 18 and a display area 22. A goal for each game unit 16 should be accomplished in a skillful manner; for instance, a ball can be guided into an aperture using hand-eye coordination, or a disc or ball could be skillfully aimed into a target using electrical controls.

[0028] An individual game unit 16 further has the ability to dispense a non-monetary award to a player. Such an award might be tickets redeemable for prizes. The award also could be baseball cards or other similar non-monetary prizes. In the preferred embodiment, each individual game unit 16 dispenses one or more tickets to the player from the front panel 18 through an award dispensing slot 24. Ticket dispensing mechanisms are well-known in the prior art.

[0029] According to certain embodiments, several game machines or game units are networked to an award server (progressive bonus apparatus). A player at any of the machines can play a game of skill. Such games require sufficient skill so that the games are not primarily games of chance. Each game machine is in digital communication with the award server. Such digital communication includes game information and award information.

[0030] According to certain embodiments, the network of game machines and award server uses a serial transmission protocol. According to some embodiments, such a serial transmission protocol is an RS-232 protocol.

[0031] According to certain embodiments, the award server provides awards based on one or more criteria including a game result, a progressive score, a completion of a specific task, an attainment of a specific goal and the number of players. The progressive score is associated with a progressive bonus. Such a progressive bonus is based on contributions from the various game machines. The progressive score may be incremented or decremented based on the contributions from the game machines.

[0032] The process that the multi-station game apparatus 10 uses to receive money and dispense non-monetary awards is illustrated in the block diagram 25 of Fig. 2. A player inserts monetary input 26 into an individual game unit 16a or 16b. Typically, this monetary input 26 is one or more coins, or it may be tokens that are standard in an arcade environment. Each game unit 16a and 16b is connected to the progressive bonus apparatus 12 by a data bus 27a and 27b, respectively.

[0033] The progressive bonus apparatus 12 has an output on a progressive score display 14 (see Fig. 1) which begins at a predetermined starting value. For example, the progressive score might be set at a starting score of zero. Or, so that a bonus award might be immediately available to players, the starting score could be set at a higher value.

[0034] The progressive score displayed by the progressive bonus apparatus 12 is accumulated from contributions by the individual game units 16 over the data busses 27a and 27b. The contributions can be determined in a variety of ways. In the preferred embodiment, each game unit 16 sends a signal to the progressive bonus apparatus 12 whenever a player deposits a coin or coins into the game unit 16. When the progressive bonus apparatus 12 receives this signal, it increments the progressive score by one, one-half, or another predetermined value. Thus, each game unit 16 that is played will increment the progressive score by this value. Other methods might be used where the game unit 16 sends its increment signal when a player reached a predetermined score. Also, the progressive bonus apparatus 12 could be set to multiply the progressive score by a selected quantity whenever a game unit 16 sends an increment signal.

[0035] Each individual game unit 16 has one or more predetermined tasks for the player to accomplish in order for the player to receive a bonus award 30 based on the progressive score displayed by the progressive bonus apparatus 12. All game units 16 that are attached to a single progressive bonus apparatus 12 should require the same predetermined task, so that each player competing for the progressive score has a task of the same duration and level of difficulty. This predetermined task has several possible variations. One variation might be that the player has to achieve a specific game score on his individual game unit 16 in order to win the progressive score. A different variation might be that the player must finish two or more games in a row by accomplishing a specific game result, such as hitting a "jackpot" on the game display 22.

[0036] The first player to accomplish the predetermined task is entitled to the non-monetary bonus award 30 based upon the progressive score displayed on the progressive bonus apparatus 12. In the preferred embodiment, this bonus award 30 is manually given to the winning player by the owner or operator of the multi-station game apparatus 10. The bonus award 30 can be a number of normal game unit 16 awards: tickets, cards, or whatever the non-monetary award might be. Such a bonus award 30 might also be dispensed to a player as follows: the progressive bonus apparatus 12 sends the progressive score data over a data bus to the winning game unit 16. The winning game unit 16 then dispenses the bonus award 30 to the player by that game unit's 16 normal award-dispensing means 24. In any case, once the player has won the bonus award 30, his individual game unit 16 is reset and the progressive bonus apparatus 12 is reset.

[0037] Fig. 3 is a block diagram of a control system 13 for the progressive bonus apparatus 12. The control system 13 includes a microprocessor 32, data bus 33, read-only memory (ROM) 34, random-access memory (RAM) 36, a latch 38, DIP switches 40, a multiplexer 42, an LED display 44, and an RS-232 port 46.

[0038] The microprocessor 32 is preferably an Intel 8031 8-bit microprocessor, which has the range of features adequate for the task, including eight data lines and sixteen address lines. The microprocessor 32 receives data inputs DO-D9 inputs on data bus 33 from individual game units that are connected to the progressive bonus apparatus 12; one data line is required per game unit, so a maximum of ten individual games may be connected to the progressive bonus apparatus in this embodiment. Data latches 31 are used to couple the data busses from each unit (such as data busses 27a and 27b) to the data bus 33.

[0039] The microprocessor 32 is coupled to ROM 34 by an address/control/data bus 35. The ROM 34 is preferably an erasable programmable read-only memory (EPROM) that contains the start-up instructions and operating system for the progressive bonus apparatus. Microprocessor 32 is connected to RAM 36 by the bus 35 to permit the use of RAM as scratch-pad memory.

[0040] The microprocessor 32 is also coupled to a latch 38 and DIP switches 40 by bus 35. The DIP switches 40 provide selectable functions that the owner or operator of the multi-unit game apparatus 10 may change to his or her liking. These selectable functions include setting the base payout score that the progressive bonus apparatus 12 will display in its starting state, and the increment value that the apparatus will use to increase the

progressive score whenever a player achieves the predetermined task. Other selectable functions could also be set by the DIP switches depending on how many selectable game options and features are desired.

[0041] The microprocessor 32 is also coupled to a multiplexer 42. The multiplexer 42 receives a clock signal, an enable signal, and a serial LED data signal from the microprocessor 32. The multiplexer then outputs control signals to the segments of the LED display 44 on a bus 43.

[0042] The progressive bonus apparatus can also optionally send and receive message signals through a standard RS-232 interface 46. The RS-232 interface allows the control system 13 to be coupled to a computer system or other data processing system to allow the control and analysis of the control system 13.

[0043] The control system 13 for the progressive bonus apparatus 12 operates as follows. The microprocessor 32 first reads the low memory from ROM 34 over bus 35 and then sequences through the software instructions stored in ROM. The software from the ROM 34 instructs the microprocessor 32 to read the DIP switches 40, read in the game unit signals on busses 27a and 27b from the latches 31, and display or update the score LED display 44 with the information from the game unit signals. If a game unit signal on busses 27a or 27b indicates a game is over, the microprocessor 32 modifies the progressive score by the determined amount. When a game unit signal on busses 27a or 27b indicates that a game unit 16 has won the progressive bonus award, the microprocessor 32 sends signals to flash the score display and activate lights and sound speakers (not shown) indicating the bonus has been won. The owner or operator of the game units 16 may then present the bonus award to the player who won it. In an alternate embodiment, the microprocessor 32 in progressive bonus apparatus 12 sends the progressive score total to the winning individual game unit 16 over a data bus, and the individual game unit 16 can then dispense the bonus award to the player.

[0044] Fig. 4 is a front view of the preferred embodiment of an individual game unit. The game unit 16 comprises the front panel section 18, a playing surface 20, and the display section 22.

[0045] The front panel section comprises a coin deposit slot 50, a bail dispenser 52, a ticket dispenser 54, and a speaker 56. The coin deposit slot 50 may accept standard currency coins or game tokens that are normally available in an arcade environment, and

also includes a coin return button and coin return slot. Coin boxes suitable for use in game unit 16 are readily available on the commercial market.

[0046] The ball dispenser 52 provides a ball for the player's use. In the preferred embodiment, the balls are rolled by the player down an inclined playing surface 20. Other types of playing pieces can also be used and directed down the playing surface, such as discs, cylinders, or other objects.

[0047] The balls are dispensed to the player as shown in Fig. 5. The ball 70 is picked up by a player from the playing piece dispenser 52 and rolled down the playing surface 20 and through an opening 72 in the playing surface 20. The ball 70 then rolls down a ramp 75 to join other balls 70' which are held in a holding area 76. A solenoid within the holding area 76 ejects a ball 70" to roll into the playing piece dispenser 52, to be used by the player in the same way as the previous ball 70.

[0048] Referring again to Fig. 4, the ticket dispenser 54 dispenses a ticket award to the player based on the game score when the player has played all of the allotted balls 70 (typically balls). Other awards may be chosen by the game owner; possibilities include tickets that, when saved to some predetermined amount, are worth various prizes; or baseball or other sports cards could also be dispensed. The non-monetary award is stored in a storage area behind the front panel 18.

[0049] The speaker 56 emits sounds based on game actions and other game states and is controlled by the game unit controller system. The operation of the speaker will be discussed in greater detail subsequently.

[0050] The playing surface 20 is shown in Figures 1, 5, and 6. It includes a player end 60 and a target end 62. Preferably, the surface 20 comprises a ramp where the target end 62 is lower than the player end 60. The player end 60 may include an opening 72 through which the player can drop the playing piece 70 onto the playing surface 20. The playing surface 20 is preferably a smooth, unobstructed surface; but it can also be provided with obstacles. The target end 62 includes a plurality of targets 80 that are receptive to the playing piece. In the preferred embodiment, the targets 80 are apertures, holes or slots that are associated with a switch 74 such that when the ball falls through a slot 80, the associated switch 74 is activated. Each slot 80 is defined by slot guide walls 81, which guide the ball into a particular target slot 80 to activate a switch 74. The guide walls 81 extend a short distance from the target end 62 onto the playing surface 20.

[0051] The display section 22 is shown in greater detail in Fig. 6. The display section 22 includes a wheel 84, a game score display 86, target displays 88, ball count display 90, and a pointer mechanism 92. This view also shows the target end 62 of the playing surface 20 as well as the targets 80. The wheel 84 is a flat circular disk that rotates on an axle 94. The wheel 84 is divided up into a number of segments 95, where each wheel segment 95 influences a specific game result, such as game score. Each wheel segment 95 is further divided into three sections 96 by section markers 98. These section markers 98 are short posts extending perpendicularly from the front surface of wheel 84 and engage pointer mechanism 92 as the wheel spins.

[0052] The game score display 86 is an LED display that indicates current game score to the player. Target displays 88 indicate the value or function of each individual target slot 80 to the player when a ball 70 is received by that target slot 80.

[0053] The ball count display 90 shows the status of playing pieces allotted to the player. In the preferred embodiment, this display 90 shows the number of balls remaining for the player to use in the game.

[0054] The pointer mechanism 92 is further illustrated in Fig. 6a. In this figure, the pointer mechanism 92 consists of a base 100, an axle 102, a flexible pointer 104, and a detection mechanism 106. The flexible pointer 104 is made of a flexible rubber material and slows down the spinning wheel 84 by engaging each section marker 98 as the wheel 84 rotates. The base 100 pivots on the axle 102 to one side of a center post 108 every time a section marker 98 engages the flexible pointer 104. When the wheel 84 eventually stops rotating, the flexible pointer 104 is preferably pointing to a single section 96 between two section markers 98. At times it may occur that the flexible pointer 104 is pressed against a section marker 98 when the wheel 84 stops rotating; in this case, it is ambiguous as to which section 96 the pointing mechanism 92 is pointing. To prevent this result, a detection mechanism 106 will detect whenever the base 100 is not substantially vertical by detecting if the base 100 is pivoted to one side or the other and, if so, the direction of the pivot. If the base 100 is pivoted, the pointing mechanism 92 is assumed to be engaged with a section marker 98, so the microprocessor 110 directs a motor (described below) to rotate the wheel 84 slightly, in the opposite direction to the pivot, enough steps so that the pointing mechanism 92 disengages from the section marker 98.

[0055] Fig. 7 is a block diagram illustrating a preferred electrical system of a game unit 16. The system includes a power source 155, an LED printed circuit board (PCB) 152; a main PCB 157, and illumination lamps 158. The power source 155, in the preferred embodiment, is a commercially available 110 V AC power supply. The LED PCB 152 contains the main game score display 86 as well as the drivers for the motor that rotates the wheel 84. The main PCB 157 contains the major circuit components of the game unit 16, including the microprocessor, driver/buffers, amplifiers, and DIP switches (described in Fig. 8). Finally, the illumination lamps 158 illuminate indicators and other parts of the game unit.

[0056] Fig. 8 is a block diagram of a control system 119 on main board 157. The components include a microprocessor 110, RAM 112, ROM 114, a latch 116, DIP switches 118, latch 120, comparators 122, drivers 125, buffers 126, output switches 127, latches 140, lamp drivers 142, sound chip 144, low pass filter 146, audio amplifier 148, and speaker 150. The control system 119 is coupled to position detection mechanism 124, lamps 143, game score display board 152, and a motor 154.

[0057] The microprocessor 110 is preferably an Intel 8031 8-bit microprocessor, which has the range of features adequate for the task, including eight data lines and sixteen address lines. The microprocessor 110 is coupled to ROM 114 by a data/address/control bus 111. The ROM 114 is preferably an erasable, programmable read-only memory (EPROM) that contains the start-up instructions and operating system for the microprocessor 110. Microprocessor 110 is connected to RAM 112 by bus 111 to permit the use of RAM for scratch-pad memory. Methods for coupling ROM 114 and RAM 112 to the microprocessor 110 by bus 111 including enable, address, and control lines are well-known to those skilled in the art.

[0058] The microprocessor 110 is also coupled to a latch 116 and switches 118 by the bus 111. The switches 118 provide selectable functions that the owner of the game unit may change to his or her liking. These selectable functions include the values of the targets in terms of score, sound effects, progressive jackpot value (if present), the amount of any award given, the test mode, the type of game, and so on. Other selectable functions could also be set by the switches depending on how many selectable game options and features are desired. The switches 118 also include, in the present embodiment, the switches 74

that are activated when a playing piece 70 rolls into a target slot 80 on the playing surface 20.

[0059] The microprocessor 110 is also coupled to another latch 120, which is similar to the latch 116 that connects the switches 118 to the microprocessor 110. The latch 120 receives data from the comparators 122, which are set up in op amp configurations using an LM393 or similar device. These comparators 122 receive data from the position detection mechanism 124 indicating the position of the wheel 84, and output that data to the latch 120 and the microprocessor 110. The position detection mechanism 124 is discussed in greater detail below; see Fig. 9. The comparators 122 also receive a signal from the pointing mechanism 92 indicating if it is sitting on a section marker 98 or not, and sends that data to the latch 120 and microprocessor 110.

[0060] The microprocessor 110 is also coupled to the drivers 125 and the buffers 126. The buffers 126 receive data from many of the switches 127, including the coin switch 128, which detects if a coin has been inserted into the game unit 16; the test switch 132, which activates a test mode for the game unit 16; the credit switch 134, which, when pushed by a player, starts a game; and the ball release switch 138, which indicates to the microprocessor 110 if a playing piece 70 has actually been dispensed to the player. The drivers 125 activate the remaining switches 127, including the ticket drive 130, which activates the dispensing of the non-monetary award (in this case, tickets) out of the non-monetary award dispenser 54; and the solenoid 136, which pushes a ball 70 into the ball dispenser 52.

[0061] The microprocessor 110 is also coupled to the latches 140 which latch data for the lamp drivers 142. The lamp drivers 142 supply power to the lamps 143, which include the lights on the display section 22 of the game unit 16 that are not part of the game score display 86 or other numeric displays.

[0062] The microprocessor 110 is also coupled to a sound chip 148. This chip is an OKI Voice Synthesis LSI chip that has eight data input lines coupled to the microprocessor 110 by a latch 149. The sound chip 144 receives its data from ROMs (not shown) and outputs sound data to a low pass filter 146, an audio power amplifier 148, and finally to the output speaker 150, which generates sounds to the player playing the game unit 16.

[0063] The microprocessor 110 is also coupled to a separate printed circuit board 152 containing the game score display 86 and the motor controller 156, which controls the

motor 154. The bus 111 connecting the microprocessor to the display board 152 are latched by a latch 153. Four of the ten connecting lines go to the game score display 86, which consists of 7-segment LED digit displays. The remaining lines control the motor controller 156. Motor 154 is preferably a stepper motor coupled to a stepper motor controller, as is well-known to those skilled in the art.

[0064] The control system 119 operates briefly as follows. The microprocessor 110 first reads the low memory from ROM 114 over bus 111 and sequences through the software instructions stored in ROM. The settings of DIP switches in the switches block 118 are also read into the microprocessor. The software from the ROM 114 then instructs the microprocessor 110 to send and receive data over the bus 111 in order to conduct a game. For example, when the coin switch 128 is activated, indicating a coin has been inserted into the game unit, the microprocessor reads a signal from the buffers 126 from bus 111. The microprocessor then sends a signal to the drivers 125 to activate solenoid 136 in order to dispense a ball 70 to the player. The ball release switch 127 sends a signal through the buffers 126 to the microprocessor, indicating that a ball has been dispensed. The microprocessor then awaits a signal from switches 118 that indicate which switch 74 in target slot 80 the ball 70 activated. The specific switch 118 signal determines what data the microprocessor will send to the motor 154 in order to rotate the wheel 84 a specific amount (see Fig. 9 for a detailed description of the motor and wheel rotation). The microprocessor then reads data from latch 120 which contains data from comparators 122 indicating which segment 95 the pointing mechanism 92 is pointing to. From this data the microprocessor can modify the game score by a specific amount and display the new score by sending a signal to game score display board 152. The microprocessor then dispenses another ball 70 and repeats the game process until all balls have been dispensed. During game play, the microprocessor sends appropriate output signals over bus 111 to activate speaker 150 and lamps 143 whenever game action occurs.

[0065] Fig. 9 shows the mechanism 170 to spin the wheel 84 and to detect its rotational position. Mechanism 170 is located on the backside 166 of the display section 22, behind wheel 84. The motor 154 is driven by a motor controller 156 on the game score display board 152, Axle 164 supports the wheel 84 for rotation. Motor 154 is connected to and rotates axle 164 by a toothed drive belt 160 and toothed pulleys 161 and 163 coupled to the shaft of motor 154 and to axle 164, respectively. Position detection wheel 124

contains notches 165 that correspond to the segments 95 on the wheel 84. The notches 165 are detected by optical detector 162 by sending a beam of light through a notch 165. If a notch 165 is aligned with the optical detector 162, pointer 104 is aligned with a segment 95.

[0066] The number of notches 165 that have passed through optical detector 162 as the position detection wheel 124 rotates can be counted by the microprocessor 110. If the original starting segment 95 of the wheel 84 was known, then the end segment 95 displayed on the wheel 84 can be deduced by counting the number of notches 165 that have passed through the optical detector 162. In this way, the microprocessor 110 knows what end segment 95 the pointing mechanism 92 is pointing to and knows how to affect the game score appropriately.

[0067] A wide reference notch R can provide an absolute position indication for the wheel 84. Wide notch detector 167 is an optical detector similar in design and function to detector 162; when the wide notch R is detected, a specific segment 95 on the wheel 84 is known to have rotated by pointing mechanism 92.

[0068] An alternate embodiment for wheel position detection is shown in Fig. 10. The position detection wheel 124' is not notched, but instead has optical bar code segments 165' that encode the segment positions 168 that correspond to the segments 95 on the front of the wheel 84. Specific segment 95 information is encoded in the segments 165' so that a wheel position may be known by reading the optical bar code segments 165' directly.

[0069] Fig. 11 shows a detail view of bar code segment 168 with optical bar code segments 165' being displayed through a slot 169 in a cover 171. The cover 171 serves to display only one bar code segment 168 width at a time.

[0070] Fig. 12 shows a cross sectional of the wheel axle 164, position detection wheel 124', cover 171, and bar code reader 173. The bar code reader 170 consists of four emitter/detectors (E/D) 172. The emitter emits a beam of light 174 directed at the detection wheel 124'; and the amount of light reflected back to the detectors determines whether the light 174 had impinged upon a bar code. Once the number of bar code segments 165' is known, the number is decoded as a binary number and the segment 95 is known. Since there are four emitter/detectors 172, up to $2^4 - 1 = 15$ positions can be

encoded in this preferred embodiment, assuming that an all-blank bar code segment 168 is undesirable as being ambiguous.

[0071] The operation of the preferred embodiment of the gaming apparatus may be briefly described as follows: A player deposits a coin or token into coin slot 50 of game unit 16 to start the game. The wheel 84 is driven by the motor 154 to spin a random number of revolutions to begin a game. The pointing mechanism 92 keeps track of the end segment 95 at which the wheel 84 stops moving. A ball 70 is deposited to the player in ball dispenser 52. The player directs the ball 70 onto playing surface 20 at the player end 60 through an opening 72 in a cover protecting the playing surface 20. The ball 70 is rolled towards the target end 62 of the playing surface 20 towards the targets 80, which are slots for the ball 70 to roll into. The ball 70 rolls into a slot 80 marked, for example, "3 slots left". The ball 70 activates a switch 74 below the slot 80 as it drops down to rolling surface 75. The ball 70 then rolls down ramp 75 to join a plurality of other balls 70' that are stored in a storage area 76; a microprocessor 110 signal then activates the solenoid 136 to dispense another ball 70" to the player if he or she has any playing pieces remaining to be played in his or her game.

[0072] Meanwhile, the switch 74 corresponding to the "3 slots left" slot 80 sends a signal to the microprocessor 110 which calculates the direction and the number of segments 95 the wheel 84 must be moved. The motor 154 turns the wheel 84 three segments 95 clockwise. The game then modifies the score or alters game conditions based upon the result displayed by that end segment 95. For example, suppose the end segment 95 displayed "5 tickets". Five points would then be added to the game score, displayed on game score display 86. If the result "Bankrupt" were displayed, then the game score would be reset to zero.

[0073] One of the target slot designations might be "Full spin". This would mean that a fast spin with a random result would be imparted on the wheel 84 by the motor 154. In order to keep track of the segment 95 the wheel 84 stops at, the position detection wheel 124 and optical detector 162 keep track of the amount of segments 95 that have rotated by so that the end segment 95 is calculated by the microprocessor 110. Alternatively, in the described alternate embodiment, the resulting segment 95 is read directly from bar code segments 165'.

[0074] The player will keep playing in this manner until he or she has used up his or her allotted amount of playing pieces. Once this occurs, the ticket dispenser 54 dispenses an award in relation to the player's final game score. For example, if the final game score is 20, 20 tickets could be dispensed to the player.

[0075] An alternate embodiment of the game unit is detailed in Fig. 13 in which there is no player contact with the ball 70. In this embodiment, the ball 70 is directed down the playing surface 20, its path being determined by controller 180, which might be a joystick controller as found on other arcade-type games. The controller 70 directs a guiding mechanism 184 left and right so that the player can decide to release the ball 70 when the guiding mechanism 184 is in position to release the ball 70 at a desired target. The ball 70 is directed down to the target end 62 and activates a switch 74 behind a specific target slot 80. The ball 70 then moves down ramp 75 to the holding area 76 where the other balls 70' are held, as in the previous embodiment. Meanwhile, switch 74 activates a rotating wheel and a score is determined; wheel mechanics and game score are achieved in a similar fashion to the embodiment described previously.

[0076] Fig. 14 illustrates the dispensing of a ball 70'' to the guiding mechanism 184 in the alternate embodiment of Fig. 13. The ball 70'' waits in holding area 76 on an elevator platform 186. When a previous ball 70 returns to holding area 76 and hits ball 70', elevator platform 186 moves upward by electrical motors, carrying ball 70''. Elevator platform 186 stops moving when it is level with playing surface 20 and ball 70'' is pushed through an opening in guiding mechanism 184 so that it rests in guiding mechanism 184. A player may now move and control the guiding mechanism 184 containing ball 70'' using controller 180. Meanwhile, the elevator platform 186 moves down again to holding area 76 and the next ball 70''' moves onto it.

[0077] Fig. 15 further illustrates the guiding mechanism 184. The guiding mechanism 184 is moved left and right as determined by controller 180. Controller 180 can control the guiding mechanism 184 by electrical signals and motors, or a mechanical system of gears, pulleys, etc. The guiding mechanism can also be controlled without a controller 180; for example, a player can move the guiding mechanism 184 manually by using a handle 190 attached to the guiding mechanism 184. The ball 70 is released from guiding mechanism 184 by activating a release control on the controller 180 when the guiding mechanism 184 is in the desired position. A solenoid or other electrical pushing mechanism can be used to

eject the ball from the guiding mechanism, or an alternate method might be to use a mechanical release tab or spring to eject the ball 70 down the playing surface 20.

[0078] Fig. 16 shows a second alternate embodiment of the game unit 16. In this embodiment, game unit 16' includes a video screen 194 that preferably displays the same features of the display section 22 that were described in the initial embodiment of the application (see Fig. 6). Wheel 84', game score display 86' and ball count display 90' are graphical images on the video screen 194 and are controlled and updated completely by internal components (see Fig. 17). Each component of the display area 22' serves similar functions in game play as like areas did in the previous embodiments.

[0079] Fig. 17 is a block diagram of the control system 119' of the alternate embodiment of the game unit 16' shown in Fig. 16. The components of the control system 119' are similar to those described in the previous embodiment in Fig. 8, except for the components that relate to the game display 22'. Video display board 152' is coupled to direct memory access (DMA) 153', which is coupled to the microprocessor 110 and ROM 114 by bus 111. Video monitor 194 is coupled to a video display board 152'. The video display board 152' contains the control circuitry needed to create a graphical output on the video monitor 194 using control signals and data from the microprocessor 110. In this embodiment, microprocessor 110 is preferably a graphics-oriented microprocessor, so that the wheel and score images on the video monitor 194 have good resolution. The video images on video monitor 194 are moved and updated using software techniques well-known to those skilled in the art.

[0080] While this invention has been described in terms of several preferred embodiments, it is contemplated that alterations, modifications and permutations thereof will become apparent to those skilled in the art upon a reading of the specification and study of the drawings. For example, the playing surface 20 of the game unit 16 can be situated horizontally. The playing surface 20 can also be angled such that the target end 62 is higher than the player end 60.

[0081] It is therefore intended that the following claims include all such alterations, modifications and permutations as fall within the spirit and scope of the present invention.

What is claimed is: